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RUEHGP/AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE 0338
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ULAANBAATAR 000418

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STATE PASS EXIMBANK AND OPIC
STATE PASS TO AID/ANE, EB/TRAN/AN AND EAP/CM
TOKYO, BEIJING AND SINGAPORE FOR FAA REP

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAIR](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [MG](#)

SUBJECT: TRAGIC CRASH FOCUSES ATTENTION ON HELICOPTER SAFETY.

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION

11. (U) This is an action cable. See action requested in of the FAA in para 12.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY. The crash of a Mongolia Border Forces Russian-built MI-8 helicopter that claimed the lives of 15 firefighters has led to renewed focus on the safety of the country's dwindling helicopter fleet, both private and state-owned. This crash, and one in February both involved government military helicopters, and the state-run MIAT suffered a notorious helicopter crash in 2001 that claimed 10 lives. With the remainder of the country's chopper fleet now in the hands of two private operators, the Mongolian Civil Aviation Authority is tightening its oversight. But questions remain about MCAA's ability to maintain and enforce ICAO standards on a rapidly aging fleet of MI-8s. END SUMMARY.

Two Helicopter Crashes This Year

13. (U) Mongolian reaction to the crash has been intense. The 15 firefighters killed enroute to combat forest fires in a remote section of northern Selenge Aimag (province) have been turned into national heroes, a national day of mourning was declared on June 22, and the Minister of Emergency Services, S. Otgonbayar was forced to resign after a bungled rescue mission took over three days to reach the crash site. Although the cause of the most recent crash is still under investigation it appears that human error and bad weather conditions were contributing factors. Authorities report receiving radio messages describing foggy conditions shortly before the crash.

14. (U) The crash was the second involving a military helicopter this year. In February, the Ministry of Defense's lost its sole remaining MI-8 helicopter when a MP allegedly ordered the military pilots to fly too low while he was "fox hunting" with Japanese

guests. There were no fatalities. In January 2001, the national carrier MIAT lost an MI-8 in a notorious crash that killed 10 persons (UN staffers and other prominent passengers including foreign journalists) during a relief operation flight in the west of the country. The cause of that accident was found to be a combination of human error - the pilot tried to land on icy slope- and overloading of relief supplies.

Military Choppers Seen As Unsafe

15. (SBU) It has been an open secret that helicopters operated by the Mongolian military or boarder forces are unsafe, poorly maintained and that pilots have had little training. Embassy personnel have long refused to fly military copters citing safety concerns and have down-played repeated requests from the GOM for monetary assistance to purchase additional helicopters because of the military's inability to properly maintain them. Mongolia's Civil Aviation Authority (MCAA) has no supervisory jurisdiction over military aircraft, which fall under the broader Civil Aviation Law, and has thus been unable to apply ICAO standards to their upkeep and operation.

CAA and Private Sector Scrutiny

16. (U) Although similar safety concerns exist for the small fleet of private MI-8 helicopters operated by Central Mongolian Airways (CMA) and Sky Horse Aviation (SHA), they are generally considered to be much safer than their military counterparts because the MCAA has been diligent in its oversight, even grounding one of CMA's choppers last year when it noticed irregularities in the record keeping

ULAANBAATA 00000418 002 OF 002

flight hours. In light of the recent tragedy, MCAA is expected to tighten its oversight even further. Furthermore, private helicopter companies also have more resources (business income) for helicopter upkeep and their pilots tend to receive a lot more flight hours, especially during peak summer tourist season. With four choppers between them, these two companies target adventure tourists by delivering them to remote rugged locations usually for fishing or hunting.

17. (SBU) Representatives from both Sky Horse Aviation and CMA recently told Econoff that they operate strictly under permits issued by MCAA, which adhere to International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards. MCAA issues Aircraft Airworthiness Certificates as well as Air Operator Certificates to all companies and their aircraft. They also conduct regular inspections to ensure that they meet international standards. MCAA states that they are in compliance with ICAO standards. L. Nyambayar, CMA President, told Econoff that MCAA oversight had become noticeably stricter over the past decade.

18. (SBU) Both helicopter companies have also undergone professional audits by Hart Aviation, hired by foreign mining companies who have chartered the helicopters for geological surveys and transporting mining personal to remote mining areas. Hart Aviation gave Sky Horse passing grades in an audit last year and a currently valid Hart Aviation audit on CMA gives the company a clean bill of health while commending the company for addressing recommendations in Hart's audit of a year earlier.

19. (SBU) Mongolia's love-hate relationship with the MI-8 stems from the chopper's extensive use during Soviet-dominated socialist times and the fact that parts are more readily available for Russian built helicopters. Service stations are also nearby, just over the border in Irkutsk. CMA mentioned to Econoff that he had originally wanted to use Bell helicopters when starting his business over a decade ago, but the costs were not sustainable. Recently, a representative from Mongolia's newest airline EZnis mentioned that his company is currently looking into importing Bell helicopters from China as part of an expansion plan.

110. (SBU) COMMENT: Our investigation of helicopter safety in Mongolia, cursory though it was, suggests that choppers operated by

private companies who are subject to oversight by the MCAA are generally safe. Private audits carried out by Hart Aviation support this finding. The recent crash has become a national tragedy and will likely force MCAA to heighten its focus on helicopter safety, at least in the short term. And we were impressed with MCAA's decision, likely bucking heavy political pressure, to ground one of CMA choppers after finding sketchy book keeping. Nevertheless, the average remaining life span of active privately operated MI-8s in Mongolia is 7-10 years, we have received no indication from the executives we spoke to at either Central Mongolian Airways or Sky Horse Aviation that there was a plan to replace them any time soon.
END COMMENT.

¶12. (U) ACTION REQUEST: As requested in reftel, post asks regional FAA reps to consider traveling to Mongolia sometime soon to help flesh out possible areas for training and technical cooperation with Mongolia's CAA as well as to provide an assessment of MCAA's adherence to ICAO standards and the effectiveness of its aviation oversight operations.

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